

ROADS: THE BEGINNING AND NOW

(This special article has been contributed by the Department of Transport and Communications)

When the first settlers arrived in Australia two hundred years ago, they set in motion an approach to road construction which has culminated in the biggest civil engineering project in the country's history—the National Highway system, 16,000 kilometres of highway that has cost the nation \$5,100 million.

Until the 1840s, most of Australia's towns were on the coast and relied upon the sea for transport. Consequently, road transport was undeveloped. Before that, bullock tracks developed into roads, but they were primitive and badly maintained.

In New South Wales, Governor Macquarie developed a trunk road system which extended as the settlement spread. By 1850, New South Wales had three trunk systems that extended inland—from Sydney to the Yass Plains, from Sydney to Bathurst, and from Morpeth to the upper reaches of the Hunter River. However, road building was slow due to shortage of materials, deterioration caused by climatic conditions, and administrative and financial problems.

As roads improved, coach services were introduced, the major one being Cobb and Co. which operated for almost 70 years.

Even with the advent of the first petrol cars at the turn of the century, travel by rail was still the preferred mode of transport. But as cars improved, it became apparent that road transport would become more popular.

The task of building and maintaining roads became too much for local governments and the more important roads were placed under State government control in the 1920s. Commonwealth assistance was first provided to the States for road making in 1923. By the 1930s, road transport was competing strongly with the railways.

World War II saw a reassessment of roads. Before the War, emphasis had been on well made roads in the main centres of population, but now the emphasis shifted to sparsely populated areas for defence purposes.

The post-war period saw the need for a modern, efficient road system to establish, build and sustain economic growth. The seed had been planted and now, more than thirty years later, the National Highway is all but completed.

Commenced in 1974, the National Highway system links each adjacent State capital, Adelaide with Darwin, and Cairns with Brisbane, as well as linking Hobart to Burnie in Tasmania.

In 1974 as much as 3,900 kilometres of the National Highway was unsealed and deficient, and the length of divided carriageway was less than 300 kilometres. Periodic flooding in outback areas often resulted in road closures, causing long delays to traffic. Now, with the majority of the highway network sealed, the situation has been improved significantly.

All funding for the construction and maintenance of the National Highway system is met by the Federal Government, with State and local road authorities acting as design, construction and maintenance agencies. In addition, the Federal Government provides substantial funding to the States and local government authorities for arterial and local roads. Federal funding for roads comes from a predetermined share of fuel excise taxes.

Following the expiry of the 1981 Roads Grant Act on 30 June 1985, the Australian Land Transport Program (ALTP) began in July 1985, and this five-year program continues to assist the States and Northern Territory in the construction and maintenance of roads.

In 1982 the Australian Bicentennial Road Development (ABRD) Program was introduced to achieve a substantial upgrading of the Australian road network by 1988.

In 1985–86, \$559.3 million was provided for National Roads. Of this, \$377.3 million was for construction and maintenance projects under ALTP, and \$182 million was for construction projects under the ABRD program.

The busiest interstate route is the Hume Highway section of the National Highway, 816 kilometres linking Sydney and Melbourne, of which over 40 per cent is dual carriageway. It carries more than 1,000 heavy commercial vehicles daily in addition to other traffic. Canberra, the national capital, is linked to the Hume Highway by the Barton and Federal Highways.

Melbourne and Adelaide are linked by 720 kilometres of the Western and Dukes Highways, and the South East Highway sections of the National Highway.

Adelaide and Darwin are joined through central Australia by the Stuart Highway section of the National Highway over a distance of 3,014 kilometres. Until 1979, the 925 kilometre South Australian section was little more than a dirt track.

From Adelaide, the Adelaide-Port Augusta Road, the Eyre Highway, Coolgardie, Esperance and the Great Eastern Highway sections of the National Highway stretch 2,675 kilometres along the southern edge of the Nullabor Plain to Perth.

Between Perth and Darwin, the National Highway comprises the Great Northern, Duncan and Victoria Highways covering 4,000 kilometres.

The Barkly Highways section of the National Highway connects Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory to Mt Isa in Queensland, and on the same route, the Flinders, Landsborough and Warrego Highways connect Mt Isa to Brisbane over more than 2,400 kilometres.

In Northern Queensland, Cairns is linked to Brisbane by the Bruce Highway section of the National Highway over 1,690 kilometres. The Cunningham and New England Highway, and the Newcastle-Sydney Freeway (over 1,000 kilometres) provide a link between Brisbane and the Southern States.

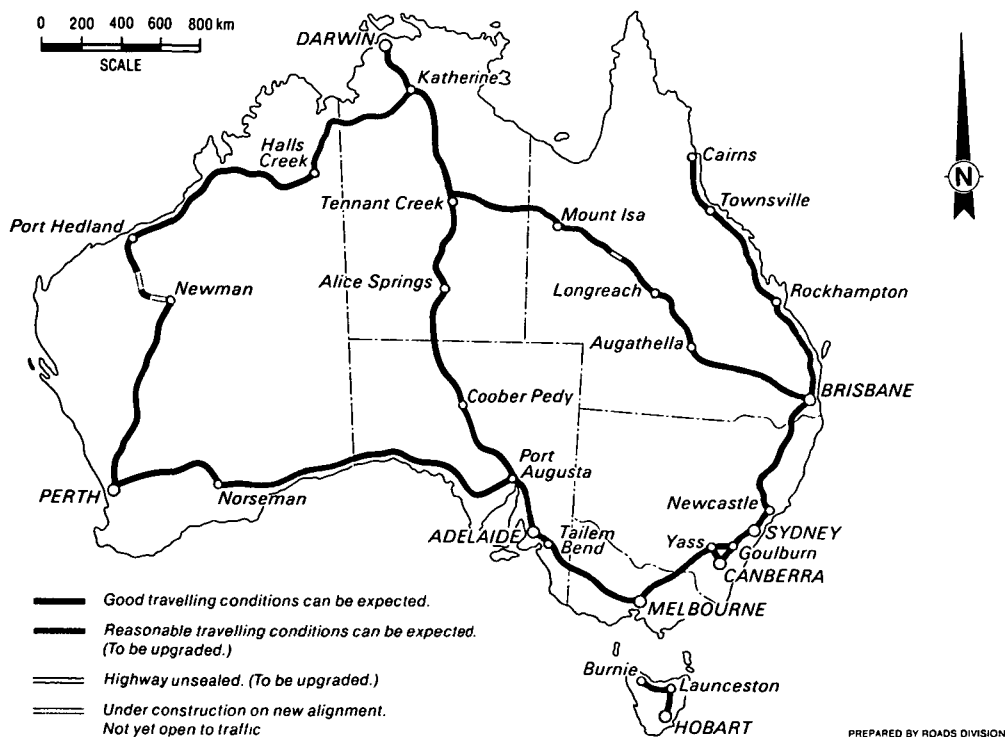
In Tasmania, the National Highway links Hobart and Launceston by the Midland Highway over 187 kilometres, and Launceston and Burnie by the Bass Highway over 137 kilometres.

Of the 804,700 kilometres of roads open for general traffic in Australia, 266,600 kilometres, or 33 per cent, are sealed, while the remainder are either gravel or earth pavements.

Victoria, the second smallest State, has the largest percentage of sealed roads with 41 per cent. Tasmania, the smallest State, and New South Wales each has 38 per cent. Queensland has 31 per cent, Western Australia 28 per cent, South Australia 22 per cent, Australian Capital Territory 96 per cent, and the Northern Territory 26 per cent.

Established in just 200 years, Australia's large road network of over 800,000 kilometres services a population of 16 million who drive nine million cars and motorcycles and over half a million trucks.

THE NATIONAL HIGHWAY — CONDITION AT JUNE 1987



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